

First Opinion: Stepping through Genres and Into a Dialogue on Liberty and Freedom

Eggers, Dave. *Her Right Foot*. Illustrated by Shawn Harris, Chronicle Books, 2017.

Jodene Morrell



During my initial read of *Her Right Foot* by Dave Eggers (author) and Shawn Harris (artist), I recalled an article by Robert Sutherland about political ideologies in children's literature. He states, "Like other types of literature, works written especially for children are informed and shaped by the authors' respective value systems, their notions of how the world *is* or *ought to be*" (143). Indeed, in this multi-genre picture book about a 450,000-pound, 150-foot woman wearing a size 879 shoe, readers are engaged through conversational prose, invited to question what we *think* we know about the Statue of Liberty and encouraged to consider views on immigration, liberty, and freedom with suggestions from the author of how the world ought to be.

The inside flap of the book jacket describes *Her Right Foot* as a "fascinating, fun take on nonfiction." The first half of the book provides historical background with a slew of intriguing facts. Readers are transported from a conversation in France between Édouard de Laboulaye, who conceptualized the idea for the statue, and Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, who designed the statue, to Bedloe's Island where 214 boxes of pieces were assembled over 17 months to reconstruct the statue. We learn how the statue turned from brown to blue-green in 35 years, due to oxidation, and the significance of the seven spikes on her crown representing "the seven seas on Earth, and the seven continents, and the sun's rays, too" (unpaged). Eggers includes lesser known tidbits of information such as Thomas Edison's proposal to install a giant record player inside the statue. The first half and even the end of the book with lists of "Further Reading" and

"Sources" are characteristic of nonfiction; however, much of the book includes elements not typical of nonfiction. The multi-genre approach draws in readers and diversifies the reading pace through provocative questions and complex art.

From the beginning, the tone is conversational and Eggers establishes the genre. He writes, "Did you know that the Statue of Liberty comes from France? This is true. This is a factual book" (unpaged). He invites readers to engage with the book from the first page with, "You have likely heard of a place called France," followed by the next page, "If you have heard of France . . ." (unpaged). These types of statements continue throughout the book, including "You may have known . . ." and "You probably know . . ." acknowledging that readers bring background knowledge, experiences, and opinions to texts. The readers may or may not have known the facts, but Eggers's word choices show he is assuming readers' minds are not *tabula rasas*. Eggers and Harris also feature children noticing and pointing out details to adults. In fact, it is a child who notices the unique position of the statue's right foot and guides the gaze of the adult on the page.

Perhaps what makes *Her Right Foot* most unique occurs in the middle of the book. Following page after page of colorful, intricate, and complex artwork, readers turn to a brown page with a white rectangle containing three lines of words, centered on the page. This left page is a surprising shift in appearance and tone. Eggers writes, "But there is one thing that you might not know, and this is the central point to this book . . ." (unpaged). The right side is a green page with a similar white rectangle and four lines that begin, "The point is that even if you have seen a picture of the Statue of Liberty . . ." (unpaged). Readers are forced to pause and reflect on what they *think* they know about the statue. The brown and blue-green pages mimic the page spread twelve pages earlier with the discussion of oxidation. However, unlike the single colored backgrounds, the prior pages featured an eye of the statue on each page, which together stare intently at the reader. With the pages in the middle of the book, Eggers and Harris prepare readers for a significant shift in tone and genre, transitioning from primarily a nonfiction text to a thought-provoking discussion of serious topics including immigration, liberty, freedom, and (social) action.

Harris captures the diversity of New York City with images of people of various ages, skin tones, ethnicities, genders, and religions. Their facial features suggest active dialogue between characters—intense discussion, perplexed expressions, complete engagement. Eggers draws in readers by stating, "Let's pause here and collect ourselves, and think about this." He flows into the next page with "Let's discuss this." For the remainder of the book, Eggers and Harris challenge readers with intriguing artwork and one question after another such as, "Where is she going?" and "What does this mean?" Readers cannot help but slow down and speed up in response to the images and printed text.

The final pages are a call to action—to remember the history of the Statue of Liberty, what she has stood for and what it means to be an immigrant during our current political times. The call to action is not about protesting in the streets and marching with banners and

signs; rather, we are called to be courageous. Readers are implored to be empathetic and to recall that the Statue of Liberty was also once an immigrant.

Finally, in a letter from Eggers to readers, he discusses the current political climate, views and actions related to immigration and immigrants and what we owe children. He states, "We need to show them how to be brave. We need to learn from their tolerance and curiosity and open minds. We need to teach them what this country is supposed to stand for. And that's why I wrote this book for them" ("A Letter" unpagged).

True to Sutherland's stance that authors of children's books often write about how the world "is or ought to be," Eggers invites readers to consider how the world is, how it ought to be, and how to reexamine one of America's most symbolic artworks of freedom and liberty, beginning with her right foot. *Her Right Foot* is a provocative and timely book that is sure to engage readers, from children to adults, through its play with genres, conversational tone, and captivating artwork.

Works Cited

- Eggers, Dave. "A Letter from the Author." https://www.amazon.com/Her-Right-Foot-Dave-Eggers/dp/1452162816/ref=sr_1_1_ssapa?ie=UTF8&qid=1535043279&sr=8-1-spons&keywords=her+right+foot+by+dave+eggers&psc=1. Accessed. July, 2018.
- Sutherland, Robert D. "Hidden Persuaders: Political Ideologies in Literature for Children." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1985, pp. 143–157.

About the Author

Jodene Morrell is a faculty fellow with the Institute for Educational Initiatives and the associate director of the Center for Literacy Education at the University of Notre Dame. She is passionate about childhood literacy and believes literature has the power to transform lives from how individuals view themselves to how they view the world.